How the learner's home language and culture can be used to reach educational goals

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Multilingualism is a reality; it's normal. We shouldn't be punishing people for having different languages; languages are our resources. The first language (L1) and home culture (C1) are vital to reaching MDGs as they impart not only means to Universal Primary Education, but also to better health and lower mortality through access to health-related information and to improving opportunities for girls and women, who can express how much they know through their own languages. Valuing C1 addresses the MDG of sustainability by validating relevant local practices. One example of the latter is in Bolivia, where there is a high maternal death rate, a language barrier and little regard for indigenous practices, a program recruited and trained indigenous women as midwives. These women returned to their communities and combined their knowledge with traditional practices and were able to share health information in the local language. Similarly, in in the Hudson Bay region in Canada, information was collected on sustainable livelihoods in 30 First Nations languages and compiled into a resource for communities and schools.

We are using the term dominant language (DL) for languages with high status in society, and the term non-dominant language (NDL) for languages with lower status despite the fact they are mother tongues (L1s). Both languages are needed in education. In the classroom, ideally, the NDL/L1 is the language the learner speaks and understands and the DL/L2 is the language to be learned. Unfortunately, the DL/L2 is often completely foreign to young learners. In the Maldives, for example, the language of instruction is DL/English, despite the fact that all learners have the same L1, Dhivehi. The negative effect of the focus on the DL is that children at the preschool level (ages 3-5) are expected to learn the alphabets and phonemes of three languages (English/DL, Arabic and L1 Dhivehi).

A number of strategies have been used in schools all over the world to bring L1 and C1 into the classroom, such as informal, preschool teaching in Cambodia and Bangladesh and pilot programs in Bolivia, Niger and the Philippines. Pilot programs can be useful for demonstrating to stakeholders what is possible. However, if under-resourced, pilots can be detrimental and cause parents to lose faith in the school, as in the case of Niger, where efforts are under way to revitalize mother tongue-based bilingual schools which were neglected by the Ministry of Education. A decentralized education system with an option for mother tongue-based schooling, as in Mozambique, can allow schools the freedom to do what works best for the communities, as long as resources are provided in the appropriate languages.

A study in Ethiopia (published in 2010) found that students in the decentralized regions using eight years of L1-medium education (as recommended by national policy) have the highest level of achievement nationally in all subjects, including the DL. Further, students in regions that switch to the DL before six years of L1 medium teaching do not achieve improved DL proficiency. This confirms international findings that investment in mother tongue teaching and learning achieves the best results in all subjects, including the L2.

In fact, research and experience dispel many myths about mother tongue based education. They also demonstrate several working solutions to common challenges, such as affirmative action for local applicants in areas where L1 teachers are few, and local/desktop publishing if commercial publishers are not interested in printing L1 or bilingual L1/L2 materials.

Heugh, Kathleen & Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (eds) (2010) *Multilingual Education Works: From the Periphery to the Centre*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.